

Mountain godfather

by Mathew Paust

Tension twanged like a hidden banjo string while we waited on the porch for “Uncle M” to come to the door. Guarding us was skinny, unkempt “Cousin Mosby,” who even I could tell had some kind of large handgun under the faded red/black-plaid flannel shirt and was regarding us with dead-eyed silence after showing no recognition despite Jamie’s friendly “Hi, Mosby,” when we arrived unannounced at the modest clapboard house on the quiet street where random scrawny pines were the only other sign of life. Climbing the brick steps to the screened porch, she’d whispered, “Look them straight in the eye, keep your mouth shut unless spoken to, and make no sudden moves.”

She’d briefed me with background after we dropped off the interstate and started along the county highway leading to the town where she believed her father might be holed up. This was the place her Scottish ancestors had settled when it was still a British colony, she said. “They were highlanders, and these hills suited them just fine. They grew corn and they made whiskey and...they still do, and they still curse Hamilton for the whiskey tax after they brought their squirrel hunters with their rifles to the Revolution and saved the day for General Washington. And when you’re up here, you don’t forget that!”

“Yes, ma’am. So was your uncle once your aunt?” She gave me a look, said nothing.

“I mean isn’t it usually “Auntie Em?”

This time she laughed. “The M doesn’t stand for anything. It’s what my grandparents named him. They named Dad J, but he had it legally changed to Jasper.”

“Good lord. So when he calls himself ‘Jay’ it’s just the letter?”

“No. He spells it like the bird. He never wanted to have to explain it to anybody. My family’s sort of original.”

“You do understatement well, Jamie.” This won me a grin. But then came the warning:

“Get that ‘Auntie Em’ shit out of your head, by the way. If you’re even thinking it you might smirk. And no matter how good your poker face he will know. His intuition is scary. He runs this county. Literally. Nobody does shit here without his blessing. You can count on that, bubba.”

She needn’t have worried. There was no way anyone in the presence of M Mundaigh, except perhaps a close friend or relative, would dream of calling him anything but “sir” or however he chose to be addressed under whatever circumstance might call for such presumption. Mostly he was silent. I must have been looking at Jamie, or maybe a squirrel in a nearby tree, when M stepped out of the little house. Something in the air, some quickening of the communal energy molecules, made me turn toward the front door to see him standing on the porch next to Cousin Mosby. No one had spoken or made any sign of recognition. M, standing still as a cigar-store Indian, appeared to be looking directly at Jamie although I knew instinctively his purview included me as well. He appeared large. At least a head taller than Mosby, his upper body began with rounded shoulders that segued into a barrel chest on down to a belly shielded from scrutiny by a pale-blue short-sleeved buttoned shirt that draped loosely over the waist of baggy chinos. I knew better than to drop my eyes to see what he wore on his feet, although I had a vague sense they were flip-flops or some kind of slippers. My scan was lightning quick before settling on the clean-shaven moon face that hosted the icy blue eyes I would not have wanted to see looking my way in any sort of adversarial confrontation. Hair? I don’t recall for certain, which suggests there might not have been much. I believe I held my breath until I heard Jamie’s voice.

“Uncle M.” She sounded shy, a tone I’d not heard from her before.

As they stared at each other, it occurred to me I should have suggested she take off the Orphan Annie wig, or maybe stop somewhere and get out of the fat suit, before our visit. She’d fooled

me the first time I saw her in that disguise. Evidently her voice and manner, and probably the mismatched irises, were enough for M.

“Gertrude,” he said in a gentle voice about an octave higher than I had expected. It wasn't a question, yet his face revealed no emotion.

There were no preliminaries, no small talk. Jamie introduced me as “Dad's lawyer” and told M we needed to see her father. They leaned toward each other, speaking fast, barely audible. I heard something about a farm. Her tumbleweed head nodded enthusiastically. She thanked him and backed toward the steps. He winked at me then cat quick poked a hand into Jamie's hair. He seemed to be smiling. “Hippy,” he said, and gave her a light pat on the cheek.

Uncle M stood motionless on the porch, watching, as we drove away. I can't be certain but I believe Cousin Mosby was beside him.

